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The Image of the FBI

On more than one occasion in this space, we have taken note of a new attitude that seems to have taken hold at the FBI since Clarence Kelley became director a few months ago. There appears to be a greater willingness to be candid with the Congress, to ask what hitherto had been unthinkable questions about bureau operations and to deal more openly with the press. The other day, Mr. Kelley reaffirmed his intention to improve the bureau's relationship with the press, saying, "I have been astonished by the impression some people have that the FBI is engaged in elaborate clandestine operations infringing on constitutional rights of the citizenry." Thus, he said, he had designed a new press policy to overcome fears that "cloak and dagger tactics of the FBI threaten to make it a Gestapo."

Well, that's just fine, as far as it goes. But, we are somewhat astonished ourselves that Mr. Kelley should be astonished by the FBI's image. He has access, after all, to the FBI's complete files, unlike those of us who merely got a glimpse of certain files circulated after the celebrated burglary of the Media, Pa., FBI office a couple of years ago. By themselves, some of those documents should suggest to Mr. Kelley just how it was that some people became afraid of the FBI. More important, they suggest that he needs to do more than simply be open with the press in order to allay those apprehensions.

One of the purloined documents, for instance, was a report by an FBI agent who had just attended a Washington FBI conference concerning the New Left. "There was a pretty general consensus," the agent reported, "that more interviews with these subjects and hangers-on are in order for plenty of reasons, chief of which are it will enhance the paranoia endemic in these circles and will further serve to get the point across there is an FBI agent behind every mailbox." How's that as a tactic for scaring people?

Again, Mr. Kelley might take a look at the bureau's methods of seeking information from black communities as disclosed in those papers and in comments by former agents. Bookstores, churches, saloons, storefront community organizations, campuses and student organizations all seemed to be fair game for the FBI if they had the words Afro or black in their titles. In fact, one former agent who had been assigned to racial matters

here in the District told a Post reporter, "The bureau was interested in anything or anyone that said black. If I were to start an organization called 'Friends of Blacks,' chances are I would be investigated. You couldn't convince them that they had no right to investigate all over the lot willy-nilly."

Once a person or a group got on the FBI's list, the Media papers suggest, it was hard to get off. Somebody put the bureau onto the Black Student Union at Pennsylvania Military College. Agents checked the group and found it to be dormant, disorganized and harmless. Did that satisfy the bureau? No, it just elicited a directive that said, "Philadelphia will, however, open cases on the individual leaders listed as the leaders of the BSU and informants will be developed on these individuals so that this office is aware of their identity and background." The Media papers indicated that once someone's name made it into the bureau files, willy-nilly, or by design, because of dangerous activities or benign ones, that record was apt to follow him the rest of his life. One former agent told The Washington Post, "The bureau has a tendency never to purge its files."

Now we do not contend that the Media papers show that the bureau was fast on its way to becoming a "Gestapo," but rather that its methods of gathering information, as depicted by its own internal documents, were lacking in refinement and in any real sensitivity to the rights of those who were the targets of its blunderbuss search for information. Moreover, *deliberately* instilling a certain amount of apprehension in people who were targets of its investigations seemed to be an acceptable practice.

So one would hope that Mr. Kelley would carry his concern about the bureau's image a bit further than merely teaching his top managers how to deal with the press more openly, no matter how desirable that may be. A close look is needed at the procedures to be followed in developing investigations and a credible procedure for purging FBI files of information which may be benign, but which may also carry into later years some subliminal suggestions of wrongdoing. In a word, it might be useful to have some civil libertarians in the file rooms and the places where policy is made in the bureau to counter the notion of all those agents behind all those mail boxes.